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PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
ANGUS McBEAN

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# The Harvard Theatre Collection

*Fredric Woodbridge Wilson, Curator*

Houghton Library  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Telephone 617-495-2445

E-mail [HTC@HARVARD.EDU](mailto:HTC@HARVARD.EDU)

# ANGUS McBEAN

THEATRICAL PHOTOGRAPHER

1904-1990

*Richard Traubner*

"MY KIND OF THEATRE concerns itself with kings and queens, princesses sleeping or otherwise in ivory towers, or in enchanted castles with satins, furs, and cloths of gold . . . There must be huge splashes of colour, wild music, beautiful people, monstrous Calibans; magic, imagination, illusion, fairies, oceans of blood and wine, and always happy endings . . ."

So wrote Angus McBean of the theatre for which he was the court photographer for nearly thirty years, the London stage from the 1930's to the 1960's that encompassed legendary productions of Shakespeare, Congreve, Shaw, Wilde, and Coward, the fading British musical and the burgeoning Broadway musical, the operas of Benjamin Britten, and the beginnings of the Royal Ballet and the Royal National Theatre.

His style was nurtured through the stage-magazine photographs of the 1920's, the glossiness of the silent screen still, the mannered charm of the Society portrait, and the then-new and fashionable Surrealism. He synthesized these elements into a super-theatrical style which was distinctly his own. Poring through copies of *Theatre World* and *The Sketch*, and theatrical biographies when I was young, McBean's photography said to me, unmistakably, this is the London Theatre.

Angus McBean was born in 1904 near Newport, in South Wales. He had a Scottish name, but came of Welsh stock. His father was a mine surveyor; his mother, the artistic one in the family, would eventually make a living buying up houses, redecorating and then reselling them. Angus, interested, was steered toward architecture as a profession. He preferred watching the glittering stars of the silent screen at a local cinema.

It was then decided that he should go into banking, which he called "a disastrous idea," and ended up at the far-out Bryn Mawr branch where bank managers were sent to "die of drink or despair," as he succinctly stated.

As a boy, however, he had developed a keen interest in photography. He bought a camera, a 2½-by-3½-inch autographic Kodak. He also bought a bicycle, in order to ride through the English countryside to take pictures. And he had an interest in making masks, beginning by crafting impressions

of his and his friends' faces.

After the death of Angus's father in 1924, his mother relocated to Acton, West London with her family. Angus began working as a restorer in the antiques department at Liberty's, the famous store that was just at that time moving into its Elizabethan-styled premises in Regent Street. The job would last for seven years, during which time Angus was also making masks and photographing at home.

Doubtlessly influenced by the arts-and-crafts aestheticism of Liberty's, McBean began the eccentric dressing that was to characterize him for a lifetime. He liked a pair of Dutch workmen's velvet trousers so much, with their side creases and wide bottoms, that he had them copied for everything he wore, even his dress suit. Laurence Olivier, one his oldest friends, remembered that McBean's clothes in the 1920's and '30's were so "far out" that "no one could afford to be seen with" him, but that by the 1960's, they were so old-fashioned that "no one would want to."

At this time, he married, briefly, "got out with surprisingly little pain," and left Liberty's. An exhibition of his masks and photographs was held at a London tea shop called The Pirates' Den. His received a commission to do the masks for a spectacle called *The Golden Toy* at the Coliseum, designed by the famous Berlin stage designer Ernst Stern.

His photographs attracted the attention of Hugh Cecil, the prominent Society photographer. Cecil took him on as an assistant at his silver-and-black studio in Hay, designed by the interior decorator Basil Ionides (whose work can still be seen today in London's restored Savoy Theatre).

It was Cecil who taught McBean the advanced art of photographic portraiture. Using a large reflex camera with a soft-focus lens and half-plate negatives which could be drawn on with a pencil, and employing gauzed indirect lighting, Cecil's portraits set the standard for the Bond Street look his famous clients desired. For nearly a year, McBean actually took the portraits which went out under the Cecil imprimatur, while Cecil himself was trying to perfect a color-photograph machine. During his year at Cecil's atelier, McBean "didn't . . . see photography as 'art.' It is only a means of reproducing what the camera sees . . . But put the camera into the hands of an artist and a very different kind of photography will emerge."

McBean parted company with Cecil and set up his own studio in Belgrave Road, Victoria. By this time he had acquired a half-plate Soho Tropical reflex camera. He would use this camera, with Zeiss lenses and Kodak Panchromatic black-and-white plates, for the next twenty years. His masks and theatrical props, however, remained his main source of income.



He created some of the medieval furnishings for *Richard of Bordeaux* in 1933 at the New Theatre, the play that catapulted John Gielgud to fame, and in 1936 his masks for a stage adaptation of Clemence Dane's *The Happy Hypocrite* at His Majesty's Theatre got him his first job as a theatre photographer. Its star, Ivor Novello, asked McBean to take the publicity photos.

McBean's startlingly chiaroscuro, intensely black, dramatic prints were utterly unlike the flat photographs taken by the Stage Photo Company, which then photographed nearly every West End show. These were put in front of the theatre, and submitted to the magazines of the day, such as *The Sketch*, *Theatre World*, and *The Play Pictorial*. McBean remembered polishing the glass every morning on the exterior theatre frames, to make the photos seem even more lustrous.

Novello had McBean do the photos for his next project, the Drury Lane musical *Careless Rapture* (1937), for which a Chinese mask was also made for the star. He began to take on other theatre jobs, including the Old Vic Theatre's 1936-1937 season, by claiming he had been commissioned to take photos for *The Sketch*: this was not true, strictly speaking, but the magazine invariably used his prints anyway. McBean's acclaimed career as a Shakespearean chronicler had begun.

It is to McBean that we turn to conjure up the brilliance of the of the late 1930's at the Old Vic, which saw Laurence Olivier's earliest *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Henry V*. The photographer wisely concentrated on the faces: the outlays for the physical productions at the Vic were laughably meager. McBean remembered that the entire budget for the *Hamlet*, designed by Martin Battersby, was £10, and that the robes for *Macbeth* were concocted from blue flooring felt, with necklaces made from 30-ampere rubber cable.

In 1936-1937 he also started two happy traditions. One was photographing Vivien Leigh—who had a part in *The Happy Hypocrite*. She would become his favorite model and lifelong muse. The other was sending out his famously surreal Christmas cards. These, in which the photographer or any of his famous models were placed into increasingly bizarre settings and scissors-created contortions, became something McBean's increasingly wide circle of stage and society friends looked forward to annually with high anticipation. Influenced by the artists Man Ray, Dalí, De Chirico, and others, McBean became Britain's most famous photo-surrealist as well as its most celebrated stage photographer.

The association with Leigh was to prove propitious for the actress. One of the earliest photos taken by McBean, in which Leigh, in the character of Serena Blandish, wore a big hat under a bower of blossoms, was sent by her

press agent to David Selznick, then preparing to cast the role of Scarlett O'Hara in his film of *Gone With the Wind*. It was at about this time that both Leigh and Charles Laughton were filming *St. Martin's Lane*, for which McBean was asked to take publicity photographs. The film, about street entertainers working in front of the London theatres of the day, was called *Sidewalks of London* on its American release. Curiously, McBean does not seem to have continued doing publicity stills for the cinema.

Until the war, *The Sketch* ran a weekly series of portraits of personalities—many from the stage—that also flirted with surrealism. Vivien Leigh, Dorothy Dickson, Penelope Dudley Ward, aviatrixes, tennis players, debutantes, and U.S. Ambassador Joseph Kennedy's daughter were among the sitters. A yard of sand that had been delivered by lorry to McBean's studio, and was not easy to move away, accounted for the preponderance of vaguely nautical or beach settings in the surreal works. Special studio backdrops were meticulously painted by his friend, the artist L. Roy Hobbel, while McBean's assistant John Vickers helped with the many props and drapes in the setting-up for each shot.

While doing these surrealist magazine portraits, McBean refused to do the kind of society photographs that had made his mentor Hugh Cecil famous. "The highborn, the wealthy, the titled expect their photography for nothing!" he complained; this was "a Bond Street game I never played."

McBean continued his association with both the Old Vic and its sister to the northeast, Sadler's Wells. He had ingratiated himself with their directress, the eccentric Lillian Bayliss, after she had first pronounced: "*The Sketch? The Sketch!?* We don't want those people here!" McBean began working for H. M. Tennent and many of the other West End producers in the late 1930's. His photos adorned the theatre façades as well as the photo-spreads in *The Sketch* and other magazines like *The Tatler* and *The Bystander*.

The usual procedure for McBean and his assistants was to see the play in its tryout engagement or final rehearsals, where he would take notes on certain attractive scenes or portrait opportunities. The photo-call itself would invariably last a half-day; McBean was known as a fabulously fast shot and never used a light-meter. The average amount of time devoted to each pose was six minutes. Often, the show's director was called upon during the photo call to compose the shot, in an approximation of a moment in the play.

Part of the fascination of McBean's art was that the highly theatrical shots did not rely on the existing stage lighting. The harsh spotlights, footlights, and hanging light battens would have resulted in washed-out

faces and a loss of detail in the scenery and furniture behind the actors.

The fabulously dark blacks, Velázquez-like in their density, and the dramatic chiaroscuro effects were McBean's hallmarks. Not for him the wispy, deadening soft-focus lens so admired by Hugh Cecil, or the flat, curiously undramatic shots taken by the staff photographers of the Stage Photo Company. For McBean, the romantic, comic or melodramatic quality of the drama at hand had to be conveyed through the portrait of the actor or actors. He shared with Cecil Beaton an admiration for the affected studio setting, but McBean looked ahead to the Surrealists while Beaton looked back to the Edwardians. (At one time, Beaton called McBean the best photographer in England.)

If "one-shot" McBean's theatre photographs each took an average of six minutes, speed was also of the essence in having the 8-by-10-inch prints ready for the producer, the press agent, the magazine picture editor. There were no contact sheets—each shot was taken on individual, by-then-outmoded glass plates using a heavy, boxy camera that had to be transported to the theatre along with a battery of auxiliary lights. (Even these fixtures would become old-fashioned in time, but McBean had wisely bought out a supply of the discontinued light bulbs and used this equipment for years.)

Then, in the studio, the process of retouching and reworking began. At one point in his successful career, McBean employed two retouchers full-time, who were called "finishers." They were responsible for erasing the awkward wig-joins, the forehead lines, the unglamorous wrinkles and unattractive facial marks. On average, it took McBean and his workers ten seconds to print each glossy, two hours to handle fifty glass negatives.

The cost of the photo call for Ivor Novello's *Careless Rapture* in 1937, without the photographer's fee, was £250, a large sum in those days. McBean recalled later in his career that in the 1930's many producers would cut the photo call altogether, to save expenses. McBean would then have to impress upon the wary producer "how soon a good display of photographs outside the theatre" would "pay for itself in money directly into the box office."

Although these McBean pictures have become precious, glorious documents of theatre history, they were hardly thought of this way when they were taken. The producers and managers wanted them for entirely commercial purposes, to lure people walking outside the theatres into the box offices, and to coax readers of magazines to also visit (or telephone) the box offices, or ticket agencies.

The theatre's press agent was McBean's principal conduit to the stars, and the producer's key instrument in choosing which photos would be used. But his or her decision was hardly the last word. In between the proofs and the theatre fronts or magazine pages lay a dangerous minefield of other highly opinionated souls: the producer, the actor in question (and his or her agent), the magazine's picture editor, and McBean himself. It was invariably the actor who caused the most trouble.

Edith Evans, among many monarchs of the stage whose career McBean documented, had utter confidence in his work, because he made her as beautiful in his photographs as she magically gave the illusion of being on the stage. Sagging eyelids and extra chins were corrected cosmetically by retouching, and McBean confessed that the soft-focus lens had been "designed" for Dame Edith.

His first work for *The Sketch* was of Evans as Lady Fidget in *The Country Wife*, at the Old Vic Theatre in 1936, designed by Oliver Messel. When she played the part of Rosalind in *As You Like It* for the Old Vic on her fiftieth birthday, in 1938, she refused to be photographed, using the excuse that her wig wasn't right. On hearing which photographer had been assigned, she exclaimed: "Oh, why didn't you tell me it was dear Mr. McBean? He will retouch us all out of recognition."

Vivien Leigh always hated her own hair, and had a large selection of wigs at her disposal. When Ivor Novello asked McBean to photograph him in 1936, he was aware that he was in danger of losing his famous matinée-idol looks. "I am 44, and the profile won't last forever," he candidly mused to his photographer. McBean and his photo-finishers made sure that the actor's good looks lasted until the day of his death, in 1951, after a performance of his romantic operetta *King's Rhapsody* at the Palace Theatre.

A factor of McBean's penchant for the surreal involved his use of montage—several photos cut up and arranged in a novel way. One of the most famous before the war was the "design" he dreamed up for the H. M. Tennent production of Noël Coward's *Design for Living* in 1939. Three shots of the stars, Diana Wynyard, Rex Harrison and Anton Walbrook, were used for one image, the design conveyed by a T-square surmounted on an architectural drawing in the background. It so artfully hinted at the licentious theme of the comedy that the image was used for the show's poster. (Tennent in fact had three photographers working on this production, but McBean's shots were obviously the most successful.) A later montage image was used for the poster for the famous John Gielgud wartime revival of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The Second World War caused logistical as well as personal problems for McBean. With the temporary shutting-down of London's theatres after the declaration of war in September, 1939, work for the West End came to a halt. There were still touring productions, but McBean's volume of theatre work declined. As the Blitz began, the studio in Belgrave Road was closed. McBean moved as many of the glass negatives as possible to an uncle's home in Bath in a "three-ton lorry with faulty brakes." Some were damaged, and the bombings inflicted casualties on several of the plates left in the Victoria studio, among them the shots of Ivor Novello in his *Happy Hypocrite* and *Careless Rapture*.

The series of portraits continued only for a while in *The Sketch*. The more lowbrow *Picture Post* (a British counterpart to the American *Life* magazine) used a McBean portrait of the actress Diana Churchill that showed only her disembodied head, under a kitchen chair. The picture was taken up by German propaganda, which mistakenly thought she was the Prime Minister's daughter, and McBean was denounced by the *British Journal of Photography* as a surrealist charlatan. (The journal later apologized, after a barrage of angry letters from its readers.)

The war meant that even the provincial theatres were at risk from the Luftwaffe. Beatrice Lillie appeared in a theatre in Bristol in a tour of Noël Coward's *Tonight at 8.30*, which McBean photographed for *The Sketch*. One week later, the theatre was bombed.

Then came a wartime prison sentence for two-and-a-half years. In the prison camp in Lincolnshire, he took photos of his bunk-mates and produced and designed plays.

McBean resumed his career after the war with photos for the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford; these were also used in *The Tatler*. He set up a new studio near Covent Garden, in Endell Street, and began to reassociate himself with the West End managements. American musicals like Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* were seen at Drury Lane, and other American entertainment personalities followed. Mae West was photographed alongside the doll McBean had made of her in the 1930's. Katherine Hepburn appeared in Shaw's *The Millionairess* at the New Theatre wearing a spectacularly beaded Balmain gown, immortalized glowingly, and flowingly, by McBean.

Some work for commercial West End productions after the war proved typically troublesome because of the temperamental stars, or else caused much comment because of their wild compositions. But the actors and actresses continued to adore "dear Angus," knowing full well that he would

bring out their best and most attractive points.

When McBean was asked to photograph revue favorites Hermione Baddeley and Hermione Gingold in a revival of Noël Coward's *Fallen Angels* at the Ambassadors' Theatre (1949), the two Hermiones were not on speaking terms. Their dressing rooms, it was said, had been created from the star dressing room sawn in half and divided by a brick wall. The resulting photos—which were cleverly put into a montage that was used for the poster—were so ebulliently good and fair-minded that the ladies kissed and made up.

In one of McBean's most inspired (and theatrical) gestures, he had the full-size producer Hugh Beaumont (of the firm of H. M. Tennent) manipulating tiny cardboard cut-outs of Emyln Williams and Angela Baddeley on a Pollock's toy theatre for his mounting of Terence Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy* at the Lyric Theatre (1946). This montage caused much comment and was used once again for publicity.

Actresses could always be counted on to comment on his work. Diana Wynyard told the photographer on one occasion that a particular proof was "very good," but that it gave her that "I don't think I ought to have another cocktail" expression. The results of the photo call for *Duel of Angels* (Christopher Fry's version of Jean Giraudoux's last play) at the Apollo Theatre in April 1958 would result in anguish for McBean and the producers. Of the seventy shots taken by McBean and then refinished by his staff, only twenty-five were approved by the two stars. Claire Bloom had vetoed all the photos in which Vivien Leigh looked more beautiful, and vice-versa.

The association with Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier thrived for many years. McBean had photographed Leigh in a popular wartime revival of Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma*. After the war, for the London production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, McBean was sent up to Birmingham for the tryout. There was a fight scene between Leigh and Bonar Colleano (playing the part that Marlon Brando had originated in New York). During the scene, McBean's assistant Kurt Hutton took a picture from between McBean's legs. Vivien Leigh hated the shot, but it wound up on the cover of *The Picture Post*.

The usual time for a McBean photo call, during the out-of-town tryout or the London preview or dress rehearsal, was from about 10 a.m. to a late lunch. After the war, there came the new American fashion for photographing the play directly after the curtain had come down, at night. The Drury Lane production of *Oklahoma!* had to be done on two successive

nights, for the total four hours permitted by American Actors Equity, which legally oversaw the American cast. For the production a decade later of *West Side Story*, which tried out at the Opera House, Manchester, Life magazine took up two hours in a photo session, leaving McBean only two hours to work. He claimed to have been helped in that brief time by the Oliver Smith sets, which could be changed swiftly.

One famous musical—also with set designs by Oliver Smith—that McBean did not get to photograph on its London premiere in was *My Fair Lady*, which opened at Drury Lane in 1958. The reason was that the costume designer of the show, Cecil Beaton, managed to convince H. M. Tennent that he himself would do the stage photographs. McBean did do photos of the Drury Lane with a replacement cast: it is interesting to contrast the styles of Beaton and McBean with the same physical production.

By this time, McBean was employing up to ten assistants to arrange the theatre shoots and to photograph and retouch the pictures. In his Endell Street studio, the succession of portraits continued, some in color. *The Illustrated London News* wanted a portrait of the Hollywood producer Sam Goldwyn. E.M.I. records commissioned McBean to do portraits of its artists that could be used for record covers.

He photographed the Beatles just as they were becoming famous, for the record cover for their E.M.I. album *Please Please Me*, in color, and then again a few years later in the same location for a series of Beatles compilations. He had wanted to shoot the four boys besieged by a horde of screaming girls, but E.M.I. vetoed that idea when it was realized that they would have to obtain a written permission from each girl in the picture.

By the 1960's McBean had abandoned his cumbersome half-plate camera in favor of a 4-by-5-inch Sinar Monorail. For the color shots, he switched from hard to soft lenses. However, he disliked using color film because it was impossible to retouch the negatives.

McBean never photographed Queen Elizabeth II, stating that he would have been "shaking in fear," afraid he would call her not "Ma'am" but "Ducks." He also avoided ballet photography, because he disliked the idea of having to use high-speed exposures. But he did many portraits of famous dancers in his studio: Martha Graham, Tamara Toumanova, Ram Gopal, and others.

In the 1950's, McBean's knack for interior design (so obvious from the settings in his photographs) found a new, real outlet. He redid rooms in his houses in Islington's Gibson Square, and redesigned the interior of the Academy Cinema in Oxford Street, using the strange theatrical touches for

which he had become well-known. McBean had a house in Beddingfield, Sussex, East Anglia (near Sir Frederick Ashton), "with Elizabethan additions," which he also decorated.

His mastery of Shakespearean and classical-theatre photography continued for the Old Vic Theatre in London, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford, and the new National Theatre, which began at the Old Vic. One of his last assignments was the *Othello* with Laurence Olivier at the National, which produced some memorable images of a legendary, dangerously brave performance.

As the British theatre moved inexorably in the direction of harsh realism of the seedy bed-sitter—John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, at the Royal Court Theatre in 1957, is usually given as the offending beginning of this trend—the theatre of glamour, illusion and beauty which McBean had so wonderfully captured began to fade. And McBean, as the official Royal Court photographer, was loathe to emulate the scrappy, grainy snapshots that were required to illustrate this new movement.

"I am bored with the modern anti-hero and anti-theatre," he stated. "The present poverty in the Arts stems, as indeed does most poverty, from lack of money," he added. Indeed, it was poverty that the late 1950's and '60's producers cried when the subject of a photo call came up; it was cheaper and easier to have someone snapping away during a dress rehearsal, without having to set up his own lighting and engaging the union cast in a further expensive call.

Late in his career, McBean had two publishing projects that sadly never bore fruit. One was to be a lavish tome of his Shakespearean photographs, to honor the 400th anniversary of the Bard's birth in 1964. The other was an autobiography, for which McBean had the assistance of the author Sewell Stokes. Robert Morley—who had been helped with his [own] biography by Stokes—suggested a title: "It Can't Be Beaton." McBean suggested another: "Look Back in Angus." (Some quotations in this article are taken from the typescript of this unfinished work.)

"A Darker Side of the Moon: The Photographs of Angus McBean," a retrospective of Angus McBean's photographs, was exhibited in 1976 in York, England, at the Impressions Gallery, one of the few photographic galleries in England at that time. By this time, he had sold his archive to Harvard University, some forty thousand glass plates, weighing eight tons.

The first book on his work appeared in 1982 (*Angus McBean*, Quartet Books, London, with Adrian Woodhouse). Three years later, in 1985, a second collection appeared (*Angus McBean*, Masters of Photography series,



Macdonald and Co., London). The notice caused by the exhibitions and books coaxed McBean out of retirement to do a series of fashion photos in color for the French magazine, *L'Officiel*, which led to further work for *Vogue*. He worked sporadically for the newly-appreciative worlds of fashion and popular culture until his death in 1990.

Angus McBean's photographs are in many institutional collections, including the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Portrait Gallery (London), the Mander and Mitchenson Collection (Greenwich), and the Shakespeare Library (Stratford). Copyrights and reproduction permissions are administered by the Harvard Theatre Collection.



Richard Traubner writes on the arts for many publications, including *Opera*, *Opera News*, *American Record Guide*, *The Economist*, and *The New York Times*. His standard work, *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, published by Routledge, is now in its fifth printing, and he is completing a cinematic companion to be published in 2005.

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